HERE... BUT NOT HERE
SHUTDOWN



Understanding **social and emotional withdrawal** and the autonomic nervous system's **protective response** to **overwhelm.**

A POLYVAGAL-INFORMED PERSPECTIVE

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THE RESTORE METHOD
CALM CLARITY CONFIDENCE

How do you really feel?

The first step is to acknowledge what your body has been carrying.

Have you reached a point where you simply don't feel like yourself anymore? Perhaps something has shifted. Life feels different. Your energy, motivation, enthusiasm or ability to cope isn't what it used to be. You may have spent years building a career, raising a family, managing relationships, meeting expectations and taking responsibility for the many demands of everyday life. You've been showing up, getting things done and keeping everything moving.

But how are you *actually* feeling? You might recognise some of these experiences:

- Exhaustion, even after resting.
- Feeling wired but tired, unable to switch off.
- Constantly keeping busy, doing, fixing, managing or feeling compelled to stay productive.
- Finding it difficult to slow down, let go or ask for help.
- Becoming easily overwhelmed, anxious or irritated.
- Losing interest in things you once enjoyed.
- Feeling flat, apathetic or unmotivated.
- Feeling disconnected from yourself or others.
- Wanting to withdraw from social situations or avoid things that once felt manageable.
- Finding everyday decisions and responsibilities increasingly difficult.
- Feeling disillusioned with work, relationships or life in general.
- Wondering where your energy, enthusiasm and sense of purpose have gone.

Perhaps you recognise a pattern of constantly pushing forward, staying alert and trying to keep everything under control. Perhaps you find yourself increasingly withdrawing, avoiding, disconnecting or struggling to find the motivation to engage.

You may even move between the two - pushing yourself until you feel you have nothing left, then retreating when you can no longer keep going.

This guide explores three important areas:

- Your vagus nerve and its role in communication between your brain and body.
- Nervous system activation, exhaustion and shutdown - understanding why you respond the way you do.
- The relationship between your gut, digestion and nervous system.

Most importantly, you'll discover simple practices to help you reconnect with your body, understand what you might be experiencing and begin restoring your energy, wellbeing and connection.

There may also be physical, hormonal, emotional or relational factors contributing to how you feel.

Understanding your nervous system can offer a different perspective on what might be happening beneath the surface - why you respond the way you do, what keeps you in patterns of activation or withdrawal, and what your body may need to restore energy, connection and flexibility.

Three Basic States

Your autonomic nervous system operates largely outside conscious awareness. It continually responds to internal and external information, helping your body adapt to what is happening around you. One way of understanding these responses, used in the Restore Method, is through three basic autonomic states.

VENTRAL VAGAL – SAFE CONNECTION (Brainstem - Vagus Nerve)



When you feel safe, settled and connected, you may find it easier to:

- Engage with other people.
- Think clearly and make decisions.
- Feel curious, playful and creative.
- Rest and digest.
- Respond to challenges without feeling overwhelmed.

This is often described as a state of **social engagement.**

SYMPATHETIC – MOBILISATION - FLIGHT/FIGHT (Spinal pathway)



When your system detects a demand or potential threat, it can mobilise energy to help you respond away, or towards.

You might experience:

- Increased alertness.
- Restlessness or agitation.
- Racing thoughts.
- Muscle tension.
- A strong urge to act, escape or solve a problem.

This response is not bad. Mobilisation is essential. It gives you the energy to move, respond and protect yourself.

DORSAL VAGAL – WITHDRAWAL AND CONSERVATION (Brainstem - Vagus)



*When demands feel **overwhelming** or your system has been under **sustained pressure**, you may experience a pattern of **withdrawal** or **conservation.***

You might notice:

- Feeling flat, heavy or disconnected.
- Low energy or difficulty getting started.
- Wanting to withdraw from people.
- Feeling foggy or less present.
- A sense of being overwhelmed by even small tasks.

In Polyvagal Theory, these experiences are often explored through the concept of **dorsal vagal shutdown.**

Why do we go into Shutdown?

Your **sympathetic nervous system** is designed to mobilise energy when we perceive a threat or need to respond to a challenge. It helps us flee, fight, solve problems, stay alert and keep going.

But **maintaining this level of activation** requires considerable physiological resources. When we spend long periods anticipating problems, monitoring our surroundings, managing other people's reactions or constantly pushing through, our nervous system is repeatedly being called upon to respond.

Through the Polyvagal framework, our defensive responses are understood as an organised hierarchy. **When mobilisation doesn't resolve the perceived threat,** and we continue to feel overwhelmed or unable to escape the situation, **the nervous system may shift towards a more immobilised, protective response** associated with the dorsal vagal pathway. **We call this Dorsal Vagal Shutdown.**

Rather than continuing to mobilise, this response is described as a way of conserving energy and reducing engagement. It is a very different protective strategy from flight-or-fight. **The body moves away from active defence and towards withdrawal, stillness and conservation.** This helps explain why someone who has spent years being constantly alert, responsible, productive or on guard may eventually find themselves feeling flat, depleted, disconnected or unable to keep going.

It isn't necessarily that they have run out of motivation. Their way of responding to life may have shifted. The important thing to understand is that **shutdown is not a personal failure.**

Through a Polyvagal lens, it can be understood as a protective response when the demands on the system have become overwhelming and the usual strategies of mobilisation are no longer resolving the situation.

Q: What have I been carrying for so long that my body may now be asking me to slow down, withdraw or conserve my energy?

Reflection Practice

How long have you been holding it all together?

Sometimes we become so accustomed to **being alert, responsible and available** to everyone around us that we stop noticing how much energy it takes.

Take a few moments to reflect on the following questions:

Recognising your patterns

- Do you often feel you need to stay one step ahead, anticipate problems or be prepared for what might happen?
- Do you find yourself monitoring other people's moods, taking responsibility or keeping everything moving?
- Is it difficult to switch off, even when you have time to rest?

Understanding what you've been carrying

- What situations, relationships or responsibilities have required you to stay on high alert?
- Where have you been putting your own needs aside to keep things running smoothly?
- How long have you been operating this way?

Noticing the impact

- How has this affected your energy, sleep, mood and relationships?
- Have you become more withdrawn, disconnected, flat or easily overwhelmed?
- Do you feel exhausted but still find it difficult to settle?

What might need to change?

- What are you continuing to carry that may no longer be yours to carry?
- Where could you ask for help, share responsibility or establish a boundary?
- What is one small change that could give you more space to recover

Complete these three sentences:

I've been holding together...

I recognise that this has been costing me...

One thing I need more of in my life right now is...

Are you safe to be YOU?

There may be other factors worth exploring, including sleep quality, hormonal changes and underlying health conditions. But it is also worth considering something less obvious: the impact of not feeling safe, supported or emotionally at ease in your relationships and everyday environments.

As humans, we are wired for connection. Our nervous systems are continually responding to cues of safety, trust and belonging - not just physical safety, but emotional and relational safety too.

If you spend much of your time feeling on guard around other people, you may be operating in a state of hypervigilance without even realising it.

You might recognise some of these patterns:

- Constantly monitoring other people's moods or emotional states.
- Anticipating how someone might react before you speak or act.
- Avoiding difficult conversations or conflict to keep the peace.
- Feeling responsible for everyone else's happiness or wellbeing.
- Putting your own needs aside to avoid disappointing others.
- Over-explaining yourself or feeling the need to justify your decisions.
- Feeling unable to relax or fully be yourself around certain people.
- Taking responsibility for managing tension or keeping everyone happy.
- Replaying conversations and worrying about what you said or how you were perceived.
- Feeling anxious about making mistakes or getting something wrong.

These patterns can keep you in a **state of heightened alertness or hyper-vigilance**, with much of your energy directed towards monitoring and managing what is happening around you.

Over time, this can become exhausting. **You may begin to withdraw, disconnect, avoid interactions or feel as though you have nothing left to give**. Sometimes, what we experience as a loss of motivation or desire to connect is also worth exploring in the context of how **safe, supported and at ease** we feel in our everyday lives.

It's worth asking yourself: How much **energy** am I using simply to manage my **relationships** and the **environments** I spend time in?

REFLECTION PRACTICE

SAFE TO BE ME

Sometimes, exhaustion isn't simply about how much you are doing.
It is about how much of yourself you are having to manage while you do it.
You may be constantly monitoring other people's moods, anticipating reactions, avoiding conflict, keeping the peace or putting your own needs aside.

Take a few moments to reflect and write about the following:

QUESTIONS	WRITE YOUR ANSWERS HERE
1. Where in my life do I feel I need to be on guard?	
2. Who can I truly relax and be myself around, without feeling I need to manage their reactions or expectations?	
3. Where am I putting my own needs aside to maintain harmony or connection?	
4. What would need to change for me to feel safer, more supported and more at ease in my relationships and environments?	

Remember: We don't just need opportunities to regulate. We need relationships and environments where we feel safe enough to soften, connect and be ourselves. Sometimes recovery begins when we recognise how much energy we have been using to **hold everything together.**

The Shutdown Checklist

Nervous system withdrawal often happens gradually. You may not even realise how much your energy, motivation and capacity to engage with life have changed.

Read through the following statements and notice which ones feel familiar.

You might recognise that you:

- Feel flat, heavy or emotionally numb.
- Have very little motivation to get started.
- Feel exhausted, even after resting.
- Avoid phone calls, messages or social invitations.
- Prefer to be alone and withdraw from people.
- Have lost interest in activities you once enjoyed.
- Find everyday tasks unusually difficult or overwhelming.
- Struggle to make decisions or think clearly.
- Procrastinate or put things off, even when they matter to you.
- Feel disconnected from yourself, your relationships or your surroundings.
- Have difficulty expressing your feelings or knowing what you need.
- Feel as though you've lost your usual spark or enthusiasm.
- Want to retreat, switch off or escape from everyday demands.

Take time to reflect:

Which of these experiences have become more noticeable in your life?

Have you been carrying more than you realise? Are there particular relationships, responsibilities, pressures or circumstances that may have contributed to how you're feeling?

Sometimes recognising what has been happening around us is the first step towards understanding what has been happening within us.

Before Shutdown ...

Shutdown doesn't necessarily happen overnight. It often follows a prolonged period of stress, pressure, emotional strain or living in circumstances that require you to stay constantly alert and responsive. You may have become so accustomed to managing these situations that you no longer recognise how much energy they are taking from you.

As you read through this list, notice whether any of these experiences have been part of your life:

- Working in a high-pressure or consistently stressful environment.
- Living in a home where there was ongoing tension, conflict or unpredictability.
- Feeling as though you had to walk on eggshells around someone.
- Constantly monitoring another person's moods, reactions or behaviour.
- Never quite knowing what to expect or how someone might respond.
- Feeling responsible for keeping the peace or preventing conflict.
- Having to anticipate problems and stay one step ahead.
- Being criticised, judged, controlled or made to feel that you were never quite good enough.
- Suppressing your own feelings or needs to avoid upsetting others.
- Feeling unsupported, unheard or emotionally alone.
- Carrying the responsibility for everyone else's needs and wellbeing.
- Managing ongoing financial pressure, uncertainty or insecurity.
- Experiencing grief, loss, relationship difficulties or major life changes.
- Having very little time or space to rest, recover or do things for yourself.
- Feeling unable to say no, set boundaries or step away from responsibilities.
- Pushing through exhaustion because other people were depending on you.
- Spending years in a role where you had to be the strong, capable or dependable one.

Take time to reflect:

Which of these experiences feel familiar?

Have you been living in circumstances that required you to stay alert, anticipate, manage, fix or hold everything together?

How long have you been operating this way?

Sometimes the exhaustion we feel today has a much longer story behind it.

State ... then Story

Recognising what you've been carrying can help you begin to understand why withdrawing, disconnecting or stepping backhave become your body's protective response.

SYMPATHETIC FLIGHT / FIGHT:

When your nervous system **prepares** you to respond to a perceived threat or challenge, your body mobilises energy. You may feel driven to act, fix, escape, defend yourself or stay one step ahead.

Physical signs may include:

- Fast or shallow breathing.
- Increased heart rate or pounding heartbeat.
- Muscle tension, particularly in the jaw, neck, shoulders and chest.
- Tightness in the chest or throat.
- Sweating, flushed skin or feeling hot.
- Shaking, trembling or restlessness.
- Butterflies, nausea or an unsettled stomach.
- Changes in appetite or digestive discomfort.
- Urgency to use the toilet.
- Headaches or tension-related pain.
- Difficulty settling or falling asleep.

You may also notice:

- Feeling anxious, worried or easily startled.
- Irritability, frustration or anger.
- Racing thoughts and difficulty switching off.
- Constantly anticipating problems.
- Feeling driven to keep busy, achieve or stay productive.
- Wanting to argue, defend yourself or take control.
- Feeling the need to escape, avoid or get away from a situation.

In this state....
I am .....
Others are .....
The world is .....

DORSAL VAGAL SHUTDOWN:

When you feel **overwhelmed** or **depleted**, you may begin to withdraw from activity, relationships and everyday demands.

Physical signs may include:

- Physically heavy, sluggish, weighed down.
- Low energy and persistent fatigue.
- Slumped posture or a tendency to curl inward.
- Moving or speaking more slowly.
- Reduced facial expression or a feeling of being emotionally flat.
- Feeling cold or having cold hands and feet.
- Shallow, restricted or barely noticeable breathing.
- Muscle weakness or reduced muscle tone.
- Feeling light-headed or disconnected from bodily sensations.
- Changes in appetite or digestive function.
- Wanting to sleep more, or struggling to feel refreshed after sleep.

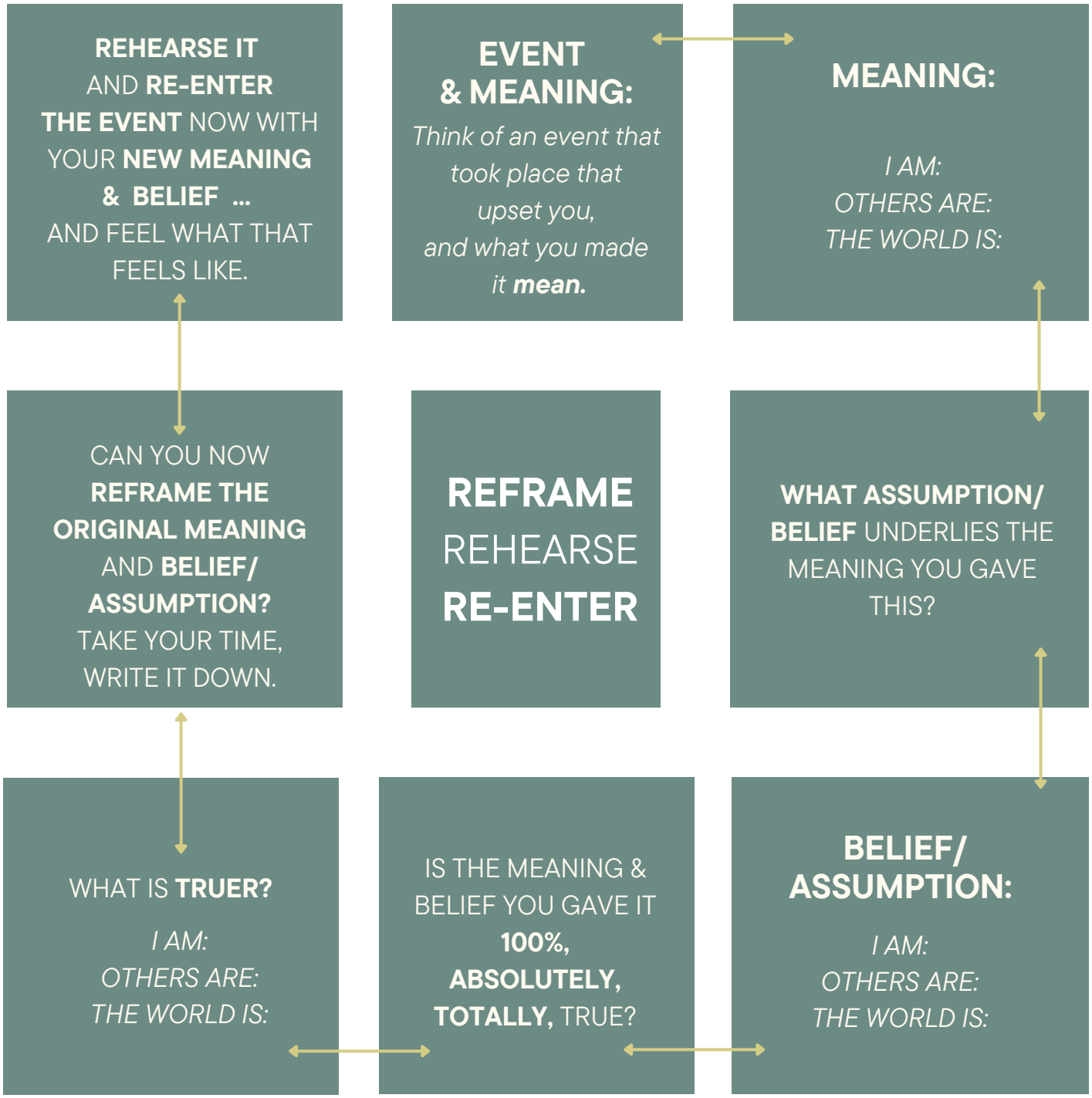
You may also notice:

- Feeling numb, flat or emotionally disconnected.
- Losing interest in things you once enjoyed.
- Difficulty thinking clearly or making decisions.
- Lack of motivation or difficulty getting started.
- Withdrawing from people and social situations.
- Feeling hopeless, helpless or defeated.
- Wanting to be alone but not necessarily wanting to be left alone.

In this state ...
I am .....
Others are .....
The world is .....

Reframe the Story

When we experience stress, the stories we tell ourselves can keep us stuck in patterns of alertness, protection, people-pleasing or withdrawal, long after the original event has passed. We develop beliefs about ourselves, others and the world that can continue to drive our stress responses. This practice helps you identify the story behind your response, reframe it and re-enter it in a way that better supports you in future situations.



When "just relax" doesn't work

If you are **already feeling deeply depleted, flat or withdrawn,** practices that encourage you to become even more passive may not be what your body needs at that moment.

We are often told to **slow down, breathe deeply, meditate or simply relax.** Sometimes that is exactly what we need. **But relaxation is not a one-size-fits-all solution.** And more relaxation does not necessarily mean better regulation.

Some people also find that prolonged or intensive relaxation practices, breathwork or attempts to deliberately slow their breathing can leave them **feeling uncomfortable or worse.**

This is not necessarily because they have overstimulated their vagus nerve.

It may be that the practice is not suited to their current state, or that the breathing pattern is creating unwanted physical effects.

For example, breathing too deeply or too quickly can lead to over-breathing, changes in carbon dioxide levels and symptoms such as dizziness and fatigue.

Some relaxation practices can also increase anxiety or bring up uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

WHAT MIGHT YOU NOTICE?

If a relaxation or vagal-support practice doesn't feel right for you, you might experience:

- Feeling unusually heavy, sleepy or more exhausted.
- Feeling foggy, flat or disconnected.
- Dizziness or light-headedness.
- Tingling in your hands, feet or around your mouth.
- Feeling breathless or unable to get a satisfying breath.
- Increased anxiety, agitation or restlessness.
- Feeling emotionally overwhelmed or unexpectedly tearful.
- Finding it difficult to re-engage with your surroundings afterwards.

These experiences can have different causes. They are not proof that your vagus nerve has been overstimulated, but they are useful signals to pay attention to.

REGULATE FOR YOUR STATE:

If you are **already experiencing low energy** or **withdrawal**, your body may benefit from gentle activation rather than another practice focused entirely on slowing down.

For someone who is feeling **wired and anxious**, a calming breath practice may feel supportive.

For someone who is feeling **flat, heavy and disconnected**, a little movement, daylight, sensory engagement or connection may be more helpful.

The intention is not to force yourself into a particular nervous system state. It is to recognise what your body might need and respond accordingly.

Activations in Shutdown

When experiencing Shutdown, the intention may be to gently increase mobilisation and sensory engagement rather than introduce more calming input. The aim is to help you reconnect with your body, increase alertness and gradually restore your capacity to engage.

SENSORY STIMULATION

- **Body percussion:** Tap different parts of your body with your hands - arms, thighs, chest and legs. Create a gentle rhythm and gradually increase the pace.
- **EFT tapping:** Tap gently on the EFT points while bringing awareness to your body and emotions.
- **Hand rubbing:** Rub your palms together briskly and notice the warmth and sensation.
- **Foot tapping:** Tap your feet against the floor or alternate lifting your heels.
- **Cross-body tapping:** Alternate tapping your left and right shoulders, upper arms or thighs.
- **Temperature stimulation:** Hold a cool cloth or cool object in your hands, or splash cool water on your face.
- **Sensory awareness:** Use strong but comfortable sensory cues such as peppermint, citrus, fresh air or uplifting music.

MUSCLE ACTIVATION

- **Shake it out:** Gently shake your hands, arms, legs and whole body.
- **Marching on the spot:** Lift your knees and swing your arms to bring movement into your body.
- **Wall push-ups:** Push firmly against a wall, hold briefly and release.
- **Squats:** Try a few gentle squats to activate larger muscle groups.
- **Dancing:** Put on an upbeat song and move your body without worrying about how it looks.
- **Walking:** Take a brisk walk outdoors, preferably somewhere with natural light and fresh air.
- **Stretch and reach:** Reach your arms overhead, stretch your sides and open your chest.

BREATH AND VOICE

- **VOO sound:** Make a comfortable, sustained VOO sound and feel the vibration through your chest and body.
- **Humming:** Hum along to an upbeat song or make a gentle sound that feels energising.
- **Strong exhalation**: Try a few deliberate, comfortable exhales to engage your breathing muscles.
- **Singing:** Sing along to music you enjoy.
- **Laughter:** Watch something funny, share a joke or spend time with someone who makes you laugh.

TEMPERATURE AND TASTE

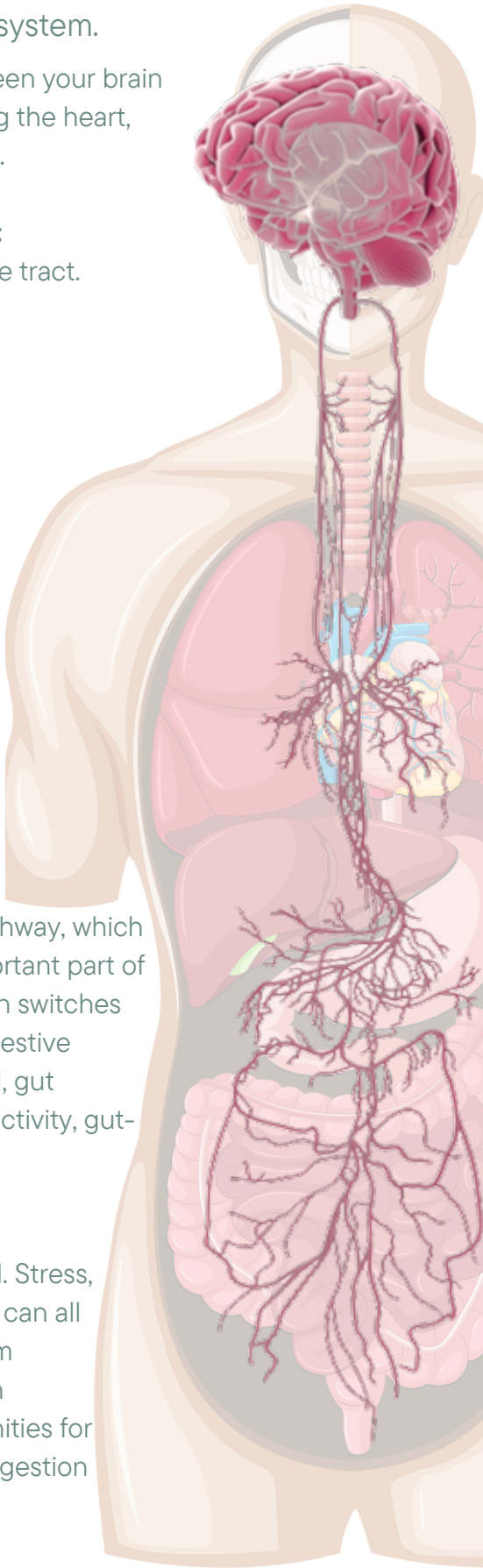
- **Cool water on your face:** Gently splash cool water over your cheeks and forehead.
- **Hold an ice cube:** Briefly hold an ice cube or cool pack wrapped in a cloth and notice the sensation.
- **Chew something crunchy:** Try an apple, carrot or another crunchy food to bring attention to your jaw and senses.
- **Mint or citrus:** Enjoy a peppermint or citrus flavour to introduce a fresh sensory experience.

PLEASE NOTE: Not every practice will suit every person or every nervous system state. Start gently and notice how your body responds. If you feel dizzy, nauseous, more disconnected or increasingly exhausted, stop and adjust. The intention isn't to force yourself out of shutdown. It's to introduce manageable experiences of movement, sensation, energy and engagement, allowing your body to gradually reconnect with the world around you.

The Vagus Nerve and digestion

Your Vagus Nerve is not simply a nerve that helps you relax. It is part of an extensive communication network between your brain and digestive system.

Your vagus nerve is one of the major communication pathways between your brain and digestive system. It connects the brainstem with organs including the heart, lungs, stomach and intestines, carrying information in both directions.



It plays an important role in digestive function, helping regulate:

- Stomach activity and the movement of food through the digestive tract.
- The release of digestive secretions that help break down food.
- Intestinal movement, which helps move waste through the gut.
- Communication between the digestive system and the brain.

WHAT HAPPENS TO DIGESTION DURING STRESS?

During fight-or-flight, your sympathetic nervous system mobilises the body to respond to perceived threats or demands. This can alter digestive activity, including gut movement, secretions and appetite.

You might notice:

- A tight or unsettled stomach.
- Nausea or changes in appetite.
- Bloating or abdominal discomfort.
- Constipation or diarrhoea.
- Changes in bowel habits.

AND WHAT ABOUT SHUTDOWN?

In Polyvagal Theory, shutdown is associated with the dorsal vagal pathway, which also has connections with the stomach and intestines. This is an important part of the brain-gut relationship, but it doesn't mean that entering shutdown switches digestion off or automatically puts the gut into a restorative state. Digestive function is complex. During prolonged stress or periods of withdrawal, gut symptoms may continue or change as a result of altered autonomic activity, gut-brain communication and other physiological influences.

WHY THIS CONNECTION MATTERS

Your digestive system doesn't operate independently of how you feel. Stress, perceived safety, emotional experiences and nervous system activity can all influence the way your gut functions. Supporting your nervous system isn't about forcing relaxation or stimulating your vagus nerve as much as possible. It's about developing greater flexibility, creating opportunities for genuine rest and recovery, and supporting the conditions in which digestion can function well.

Vagal Tone and your gut health

Supporting healthy vagal function can help your body respond more flexibly to stress and create better conditions for digestion.

Shutdown, just like Flight-or-fight, is not a permanent state.

Your nervous system is designed to move between different states in response to what is happening around you.

When you enter periods of shutdown, it doesn't mean digestion switches off or that your gut automatically enters a state of rest and repair.

Digestive function is influenced by several interacting systems, including the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, hormones and the enteric nervous system - the network of nerves within the gut itself.

However, if you have spent a long time living with stress, pressure and heightened sympathetic activation, your digestive system may have been affected along the way.

Even when your response shifts from pushing forward and staying on high alert to withdrawing and feeling depleted, digestive symptoms may persist. Bloating, constipation, diarrhoea, nausea, changes in appetite and abdominal discomfort can all be part of the picture.

Understanding the vagus nerve helps us recognise how closely gut health and nervous system health are connected. Supporting your wellbeing means looking at the whole picture - not just what you eat, but also the stress you've experienced, the quality of your recovery and the conditions your body needs to function well.

WHAT IS VAGAL TONE?

Vagal tone refers to how effectively the vagus nerve functions as part of your parasympathetic nervous system, supporting communication between your brain and body and helping regulate important functions such as heart rate, breathing and digestion.

WAYS TO SUPPORT VAGAL TONE

Slow, comfortable breathing: Gentle breathing, with an easy, unforced exhale, can influence vagal activity and support a calmer physiological state.

Humming and vocalising: Humming, singing and making gentle sounds engage the muscles of your throat and voice and can be useful ways to settle and reconnect with your body.

Safe social connection: Spending time with people you feel comfortable and supported around can help reduce the sense of needing to remain on guard.

Gentle movement: Walking, stretching and time in nature can support circulation, mood and autonomic flexibility.

Eating in a settled state: Give yourself time to sit down, slow your pace, chew thoroughly and enjoy your meals without rushing.

Rest and recovery: Prioritise restorative sleep, regular breaks and opportunities to step away from ongoing demands.

A Balanced Approach

Rather than trying to stimulate your vagus nerve as much as possible, think about supporting its natural role in regulation.

- Keep breathing comfortable and natural.
- Avoid forcing deep breaths, prolonged exhales or breath holds.
- Keep humming and vocal exercises gentle and brief.
- Choose movement when you feel sluggish or withdrawn.
- Allow quiet and rest when you feel overstimulated.
- Use your senses to reconnect with your surroundings.
- Notice how you feel during and after a practice, not just while you are doing it.

If a practice leaves you feeling worse, stop. You don't need to push through it or assume that discomfort means it is working.

Don't overlook your physical health
When you have been exhausted for a long time, it is important to look beyond nervous system regulation alone.

Your **adrenal glands** are part of your body's stress-response system. They produce hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline, that help you respond to changing demands. Prolonged stress can influence the systems involved in stress regulation, but persistent fatigue should not automatically be attributed to adrenal exhaustion or burnout.

Hormonal changes can also play a role. **For women**, declining oestrogen during perimenopause and menopause can influence sleep, energy, mood and stress responses. **Men** can also experience age-related changes in testosterone, which may affect energy, mood and wellbeing. If simple regulation practices, rest and lifestyle changes aren't making a difference, it may be time to speak with your medical professional and investigate what else could be contributing.

Depending on your symptoms and health history, your health professional may consider blood tests to check things such as:

- Iron levels and ferritin.
- Vitamin B12 and folate.
- Vitamin D.
- Thyroid function.
- Blood glucose, electrolytes and other relevant minerals.
- Full blood count.
- Hormone levels, where clinically indicated.

Gentle Reminders

Everyone responds differently. Start gently, pay attention to how your body feels and choose practices that feel supportive.

- [ ] If something leaves you feeling more uncomfortable, dizzy, nauseous or exhausted, stop and reconsider whether it is right for you.

- [ ] Support your wellbeing over time. By creating more opportunities for your body to feel settled, supported and connected, you may also create more favourable conditions for digestive health and overall wellbeing.

- [ ] Listen to your body. Work at your own pace. And remember that seeking support is also part of looking after yourself.



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